

# THE—HAUNTED—COAT.

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**I**N the afternoon of her graduation day Betty went up garret, because she felt uncertain and new, needing the grave companionship of things that had stepped aside with honorably rounded careers, to meditate among cobwebs. The June sun was warm on the roof, bringing out the smell of old resin from the knots in the rafters. Cobwebs here and there catching the sunlight upon their dust, demonstrated something geometrically with golden lines and angles against dark corners. A mud-wasp grumbled up and down the dim window, and in the street a hand-organ

troned a march. Betty, as clean and new in her white gown and slippers as a butterfly still hanging to its cocoon with rears in its wings showing how it was packed, perched awkwardly upon her old high-chair, and wondered what he ought to be thinking about. Life was solemn. Everybody had said so that morning. Her own essay had been to that effect, with many quotations to prove her point. "Life is real, life is earnest." The world, in effect, needed a number of things done to it, and young people who were just commencing bore heavy responsibility.

The discarded furniture and rubbish seemed taking counsel together. "Is it so solemn?" The cradle asked hat, and a cross of wax flowers under a glass shade answered:

"Why should it be so? One lives as long as one is pretty or useful, or thought to be so; then one comes up here. That is all."

"It is very quiet," said a broken toy drum, across whose head lay a dejected doll in hoop-skirts; but a aircloth sofa replied with dignity:

"Well, what then? Quiet is a good thing."

The opinion of an old leather trunk, hardly perceptible in a dark chimney-corner, seemed less simple of interpretation. Her mother had shown her what was in it, crying, and that grief had bewildered Betty to whom all time before she was born seemed remote. The desire of idle hands to pry and seek came upon her, the lid went back with a shrill cry, and the smell of faded disintegrating things came up. She lifted the yellow linen cloth and admired the martial glitter of the uniform beneath, patting the smooth black broadcloth, and running her fingers over the yellow buttons. How fine that young uncle of hers must have looked in it! The girls in the queer dresses of those days must have thought so. When he wore it he was only a few years older than Betty, and he had died before he knew anything about being old and bald, when he looked as he did in the picture downstairs, like the young men Betty knew, except for wearing odd-looking collars and those locks of hair in front of his ears.

She folded the coat over the trunk lid so that the rows of buttons presented a martial front. The long tails showed white silk lining; the epaulets must have been gorgeous when his trim young shoulders were under them. This was the sort of coat one wore to wars; had he loved to dance then as much as Betty did now? Had he been very sorry to die? Once that coat had been an unimportant part of him—now it was all that remained, stitches, shoulder-padding, a little spot that might have been wine, the buttonholes showing how they had been buttoned and unbuttoned—but he was quite unreal, who had once been as real as Betty herself. Did one stop being real? Would Betty's graduating gown outlast Betty?

"How fine I used to feel in that! There's nothing like a little gold braid to set a fellow up." He touched the epaulets caressingly. There was a ball—do they play the 'Blue Danube' now?"

"Not often, but we're going to have it to-night."

"To-night? What's to-night?"

"My graduation reception. We have a little dance afterward, you know."

"Is that so? I'd have liked to go first-rate—thirty years ago—you'd have given me a dance, wouldn't you? Can I forget that night in June?" he hummed. "And it's as real to you now as it used to be to me—I say—"

He was putting on the coat.

"The silk is falling to pieces, and the moths have been at the sleeves." He sighed as he buttoned it over his chest. "It's odd how fond one is of the little things one leaves behind; they aren't of any real consequence, yet we keep buzzing about like bees over honey—and it's foolish to come back, yet we're always doing it. Can I forget that night in June?—May I have the honor?"

He bowed before her with crooked elbow. Something happened to the garret; there were glimmering lights and shadows of another place, as when you take two photographs on the same plate, and these strength-

ened and brightened until there was a great room banked with flowers and palms; an orchestra at one end played the "Blue Danube," and there was such a crowd of people in gay queer clothes as Betty had never seen in all her days.

"May I have the honor?" said the trim young officer again, still bowing and offering his arm. His coat looked very new indeed. One could not imagine moth holes and tattered linings. She slipped her hand under his elbow and was whirled into the rustling crowd—all drifting together like autumn leaves while the band played the "Blue Danube."

"How do you like it?" whispered her uncle. "It's my first official ball. I couldn't come to yours, you see, so I've taken you to mine. It's old-fashioned, I know—but—once it was real!"

"I'm just dreaming it!" said Betty doubtfully.

"Of course. What else could there be now? What are you looking sad for? It's not gloomy. Why should things be sad just because they're over?"

Yet the dream ladies, though they smiled and bowed and waved their fans as they circled softly about in their funny hoops, might have been saying to themselves or whispering to their partners: "How nice it would be if it were only real."

"You mustn't cry," said her uncle anxiously; "please don't! It will go—whisk—if you do, for it's only a dream—about— There she is! Look quick! That dark girl with red roses at her breast, and one in her hair. She had to come. It was her dream, too. She had promised me a dance, and I can't give it up, even for you, though you are real. Stay here, Betty, and keep the dream steady for us."

Betty stood by a pillar while he departed swiftly, and tried stoutly to hold the dream to its moorings, though sometimes it would waver, like a fog before a wind, showing a garret rafter through the chandelier, or an outcropping of the leather trunk where should be a red sofa with two pale ladies sitting on it.

Her uncle and the dark girl did not dance together long, but went out under an archway which looked cool and dim, and Betty was left alone, watching the people. At first she had to laugh a little at the hoops; presently her opinion changed, the hoops seemed the only proper dress in the world, and it was she who was absurd and out of date. One's hair, moreover, should be parted in the middle, brought down over the ears with a rigid smoothness, then curl accurately in the neck, and have a moss-rose or camellia tucked into it. Betty gathered her slim skirts even more tightly about her and stood close to her pillar. How real they seemed! Would Betty's graduating reception ever be like this?

"Here she is!" said her uncle. He was smiling. The dark girl was on his arm, and no longer wore a rose in her hair, for it had changed to the buttonhole of the young officer's coat, and smelled so sweet that Betty's face suddenly quivered and wrinkled.

"You mustn't cry!" said her uncle anxiously.

"It's the music and the rose!" gasped Betty.

"If you cry, you'll spoil everything," pleaded the dark girl, clasping her hands. "Oh, please don't cry!"

"There isn't anything to be sorry about, Betty. I thought it would give you pleasure."

"But—it's all over, and you died. You were happy about her and the rose, and all, but nothing ever came of it, and it's so long ago!"

"We had this evening, didn't we?—besides—"

The girl caught Betty's uncle around the neck and pointed at Betty's face.

"It's rolling down her cheek—when it falls—"

The tear splashed from Betty's chin to the floor, the room wavered and broke into ripples like a lake with rain on it, and the brown rafters shut down. One glimpse of two reproachful young faces looking back at her, and then there was only the open leather trunk with the coat thrown across it, one empty moth-eaten sleeve dangling to the floor. The sleepy sunlight still lay on the carpet, and the wasp grumbled up and down the window.



**A** YOUNG man stood by the trunk looking down upon its contents with a thoughtful air.

"You are a—dream, aren't you?" whispered Betty.

"That's all."

But his voice was wistful as if he wished he were more than that. Then he smiled dimly.